



# Iran's Broadcaster: Inauthentic Behavior

Facebook Takes Down Covert Assets  
Linked To State Broadcaster

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**Takedowns**

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### Introduction

On April 30, Facebook took down over 500 pages, groups, and accounts that it attributed to Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation, or IRIB, the Iranian state broadcaster. Parts of the network were live at the moment of the takedown; others had been briefly active as far back as 2011. Overall, the takedown covered nine years of sporadic activity in almost as many languages.

[Announcing](#) the takedown on May 5, Facebook said, “The individuals behind this network relied on a combination of authentic and fake accounts — some of which had been previously detected and disabled by our automated systems — to post in Groups, manage Pages, and drive people to off-platform sites. (...) Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation.”

Before the takedown, Facebook shared the names of some of the assets with Graphika for an independent assessment.

The assets posted about a wide range of themes, from perennial Iranian concerns, such as the country's enmity with Israel and Saudi Arabia, to more surprising and momentary topics, such as the Occupy Movement of 2012 and the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. Some assets were only briefly active and appear to have been experimental; some posted for years. Many posed as independent news outlets or independent commentators or were associated with websites that made similar claims. Most of the assets had followings in the hundreds or low thousands; a handful had more, and a handful had none at all. .

The primary language of these assets was Arabic, with English a distant second (there were three times as many pages in Arabic). The network also included assets that posted in Persian, Bengali, Bosnian, and French. Its initial focus was on politics, culture, and events in the Middle East, and it briefly flirted with domestic politics in the United States (2012) and United Kingdom (2014).

Starting in 2017, it began to build out a portfolio of accounts that were focused on events in Africa; by the time the network was taken down, these constituted a large part of its activity.

Much of the network's activity resembled other known Iranian influence operations. The Islamic Republic has long been one of the most persistent actors in this field: the exposure of actors such as the [International Union of Virtual Media](#) (IUVM) and operations such as [Endless Mayfly](#) and [Distinguished Impersonator](#) have illustrated Iran's repeated attempts at covert online influence, and Facebook and Twitter have [exposed repeated Iranian operations](#) on their platforms. IRIB itself was implicated in Facebook takedowns in [March 2019](#) (via its subsidiary Pars Today) and [August 2018](#) (via PressTV).

The latest IRIB network - it was too dispersed in time and space to call it a single operation - used some of the same tactics as these other operations. It ran a number of websites and social media assets that claimed to be independent but amplified Iranian state narratives. It based its activity on a large number of fake accounts - over 300 at the time of the takedown - that claimed personas and locations in the countries it was targeting. The focus on Africa in its latter years also resembled other Iranian operations, notably the IUVM network, which Graphika [exposed](#) in April as running a small handful of low-impact accounts and a related website focused on Africa.

A particularly interesting feature of the network was the way it targeted the United States and United Kingdom with fake accounts, memes, and cartoons as early as 2012-2014. It particularly targeted the Republican primaries of early 2012, when it backed Ron Paul and attacked Mitt Romney, and the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, when it backed independence. These efforts do not appear to have yielded viral impact or any other measurable form of success, and the network abandoned them relatively quickly. Nevertheless, Facebook's revelation is of historical interest: it provides a confirmed data point on attempted foreign interference in Western democratic exercises as far back as 2012, a full electoral cycle before the Russian interference of 2016.

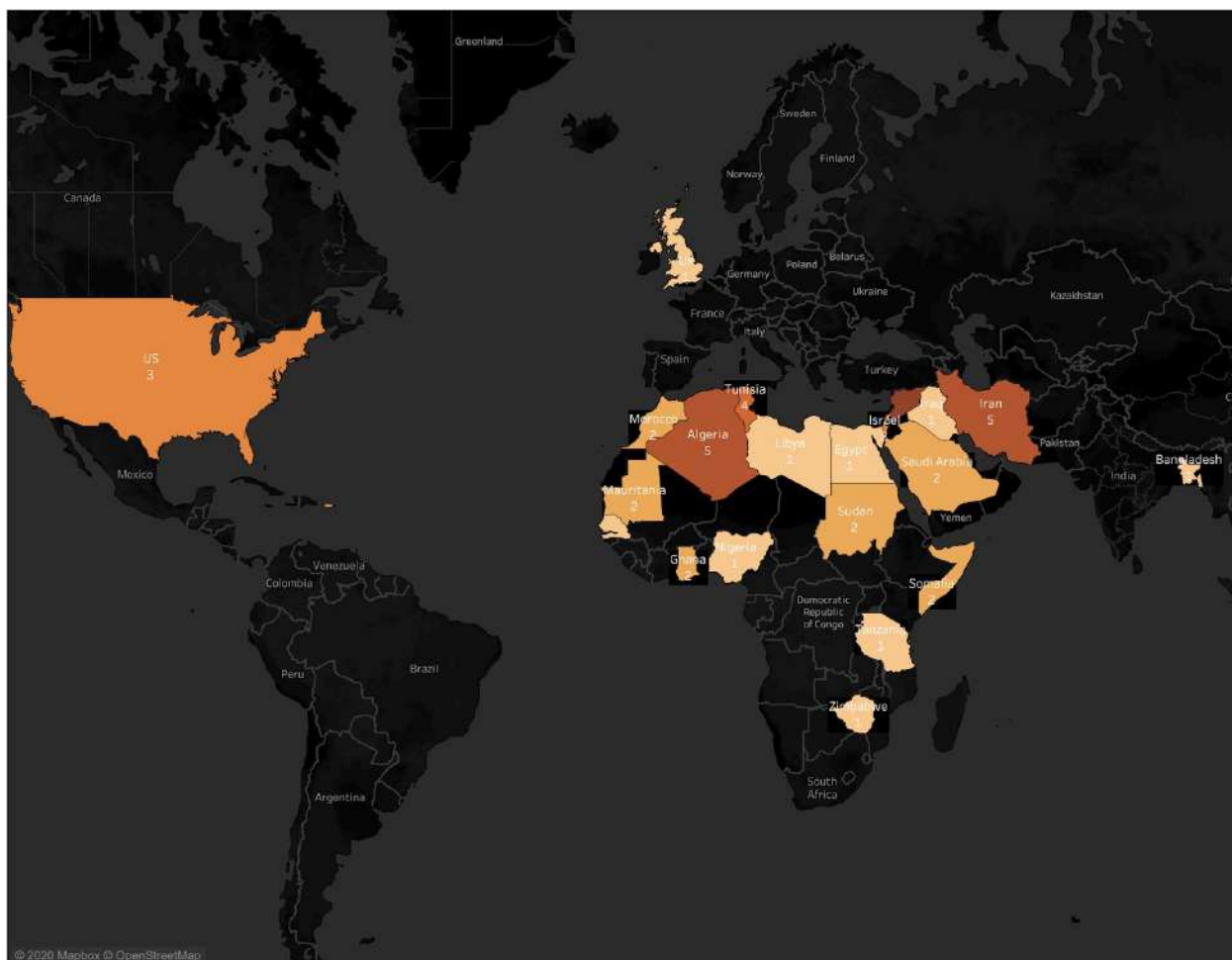
# The IRIB Takedown: Key Points

The dataset that Facebook provided to Graphika was unusual for the temporal and geographical range of the assets it involved. It included over 100 pages and 27 groups that spanned a period from 2011 to 2020 and posted to audiences across four continents - Asia, Europe, Africa, and North America.

Despite this range, the network largely focused on a small number of core themes, described in more detail below. Many of its assets conducted what could have been considered classic public diplomacy, if it had been done overtly: promoting Iran's successes and spiritual authority to Arabic- and English-speaking audiences. Some amplified state outlets: they drew some of their content from IRIB affiliates, such as PressTV and Al-Alam TV, in what seems to have been an attempt at basic audience boosting.

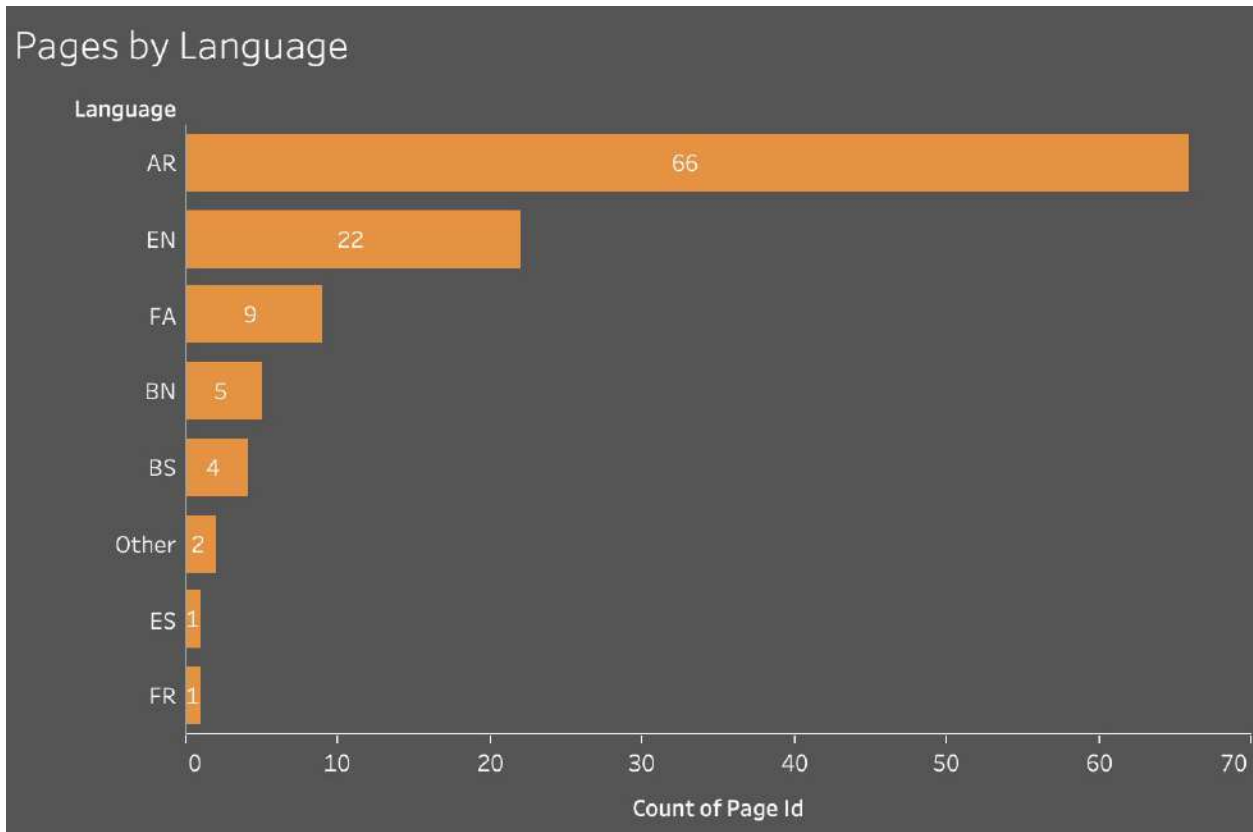
Some took a more geopolitical approach: they attacked the Iranian regime's perceived enemies, notably Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) group, or People's Mujahedin of Iran (PMOI), which Iran considers a terrorist grouping. Only a few conducted what would now be considered "foreign interference" in the manner of the Russian Internet Research Agency, and they did so well before the IRA launched its main campaign against the United States. Some Iranian assets that were briefly active in 2012 focused on the Republican primaries ahead of the US presidential election that year, and a small number focused on Scotland's independence referendum in 2014. These appear to have been a small-scale experiment; it was not repeated.

A significant number of assets that were created in or after 2017 focused on politics in Africa. These were based around one of the network's main web domains, Africa-Press[.]com. They very largely took their content from genuine African news sites and re-posted it without attribution; this seems likely to have been an exercise at audience building. The approach did not translate into great virality: the "Africa Press" page with the highest following, devoted to Egypt, had under 8,000 followers at the time of the takedown, and others in the brand had none at all.



*Map of countries on which the pages in the network focused. We define “focus” as either naming themselves for a particular country or predominantly posting about that country. Not all the pages in the network had a specific geographical focus.*

Arabic was the operation’s main language: of the pages that Graphika was able to review, 66 were in Arabic, compared with only 22 in English, and the network boasted 16 Arabic-language groups and 7 English ones. Some English-language content focused directly on electoral issues in English-speaking countries, but more concerned Iran’s religious and regional status and role. The focus on Western democratic exercises appears to have been a short-lived experiment conducted with a relatively small number of accounts: it did not have the scale, the sophistication, or the duration of the later Russian efforts.



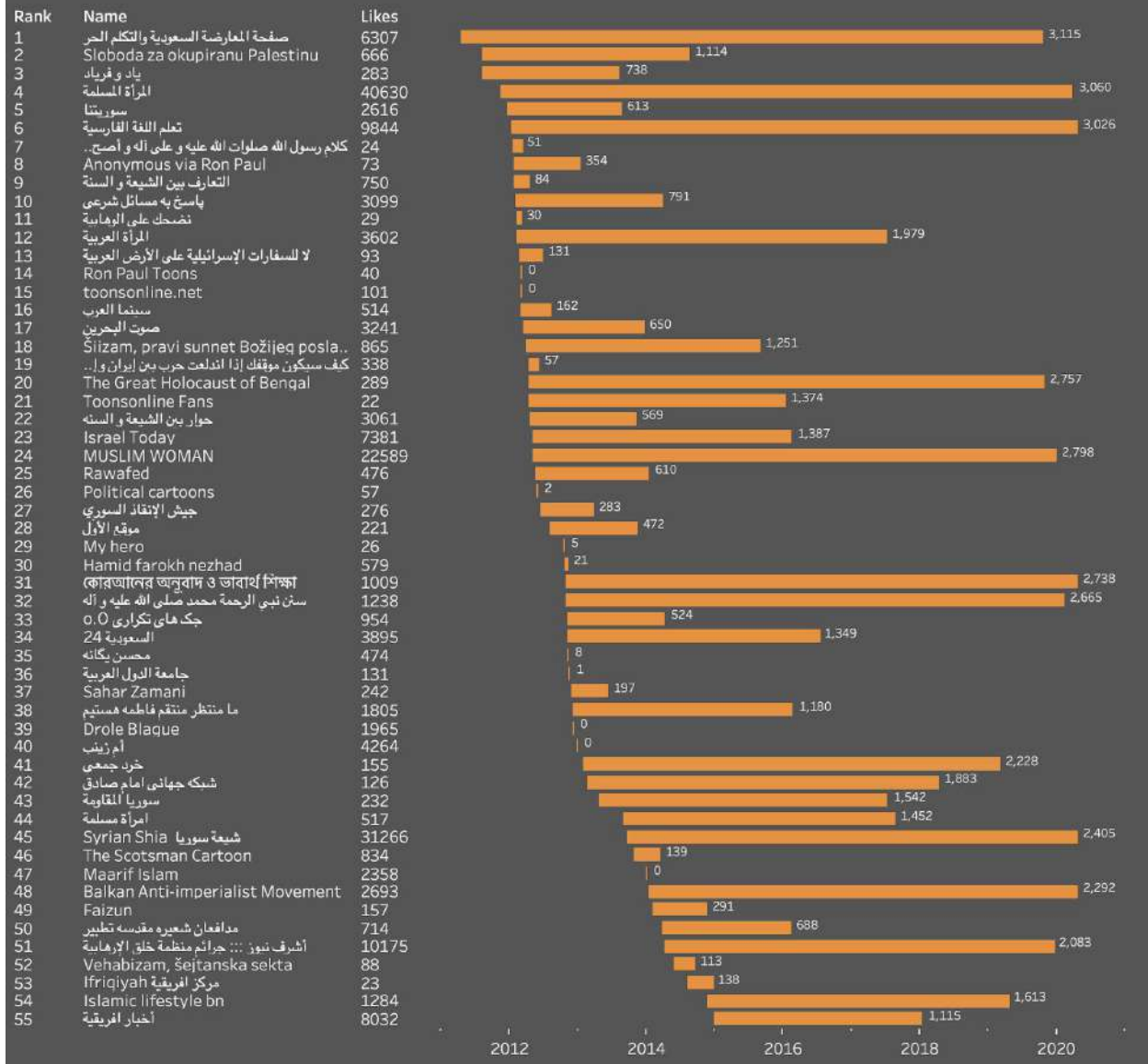
*Breakdown of the IRIB network's content on pages by language. Arabic was the most used, followed by English, Persian, Bengali, and Bosnian.*

The network tried different approaches to the assets it controlled. It ran some of them for years, posting considerable volumes of content (predominantly in Arabic) and amassing thousands of followers. Others were created and abandoned over the course of a single day. Some of the groups that the network created and amplified seem to have been taken over by other users after a period of inactivity; it is not clear whether this was a case of the IRIB network handing on its assets to new owners or losing control of them thanks to social engineering or hacking.

Especially in 2012-2014, the network created pages and accounts that it used for only a few days or months and then dropped. From March 2016 to May 2017, it did not create any pages at all; when it resumed, it was with the first three of the "Africa Press" pages, focused on Tunisia, Nigeria, and Senegal. The graphs on the following two pages illustrate the lifespans of the different pages that IRIB ran.

## Timeline of Activity by page

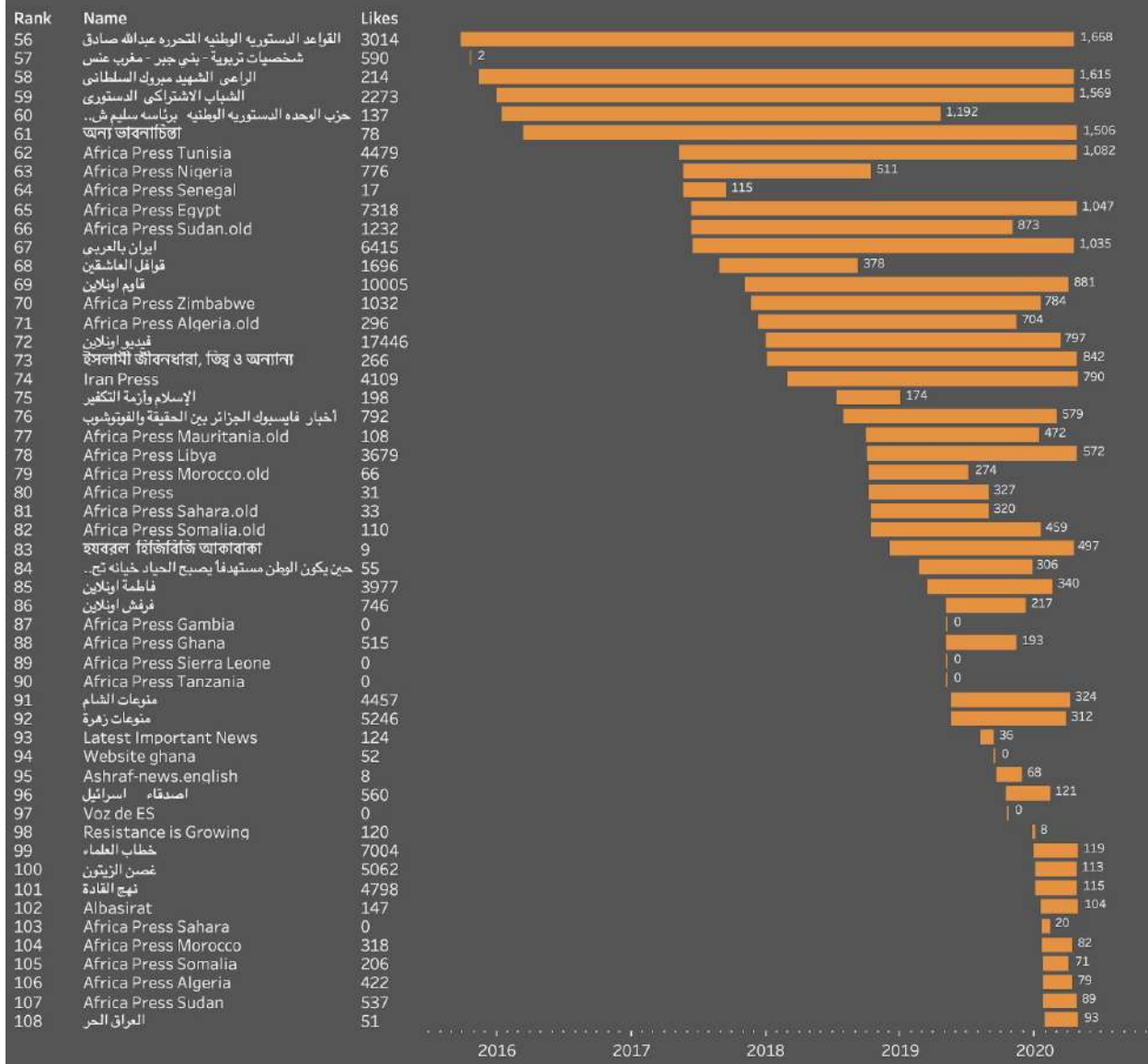
\*ordered by date of creation, bars show number of days active between page creation and most recent post



Activity by pages across the set, showing the date of creation and the date of the last publicly visible post; the number represents the count of days between these two points. This chart shows the 54 oldest assets; the chart on the following page shows the 54 newest. Two pages were taken down before Graphika was able to review them. Note the very brief lifespan of some of the pages, especially in 2012-2013.

## Timeline of Activity by page

\*ordered by date of creation, bars show number of days active between page creation and most recent post



Activity by pages across the set, showing the date of creation, the date of the last publicly visible post, and the number of days between. This chart shows the 54 newest assets. Note the marked dominance of pages in the Africa Press cluster from the Tunisian page (created in May 2017) onward, but with some of them appearing as stubs of pages, such as Africa Press Gambia (number 87), with zero likes and no posts.

## Public Diplomacy (but Covert)

Some of the network's content read like public diplomacy on behalf of the Iranian government and, in particular, Ayatollah Khamenei. This was particularly focused in Arabic, and many of its posts featured sayings from the Ayatollah on various aspects of religious life.

One Arabic-language page in particular was called نهج القادة (Leader's Approach) and focused on sayings from Ayatollah Khamenei and his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini. The page itself was created on January 1, 2020; by the time it was taken down, it had 4,921 followers.



Typical posts with automatic translation from the page نهج القادة (Leader's Approach), April 2020.

The IRIB network appears to have viewed this page as an important asset. A number of other pages in the network that had significantly larger followings amplified it repeatedly; the posts that they amplified primarily concerned religious issues and wise sayings from the Leader. Only a minority were geopolitical in scope.



Posts by the page *نهج القادة* (Leaders Approach) being shared by other assets in the network. None of these pages stated their affiliation to IRIB. These pages had respectively 10,192 (left), 59,445 (center), and 31,354 (right) followers. The center post included a video that asked Iraqis what they thought of “foreign interference” in their countries.

Other pages in the IRIB network had straightforward cultural, religious, or promotional vocations. One page in particular was called *تعلم اللغة الفارسية* (“learn the Persian language” in Arabic), and that is what it offered users, with a series of posts providing Persian words and their translations into both Arabic and English. The page also promoted a website for learning Persian.

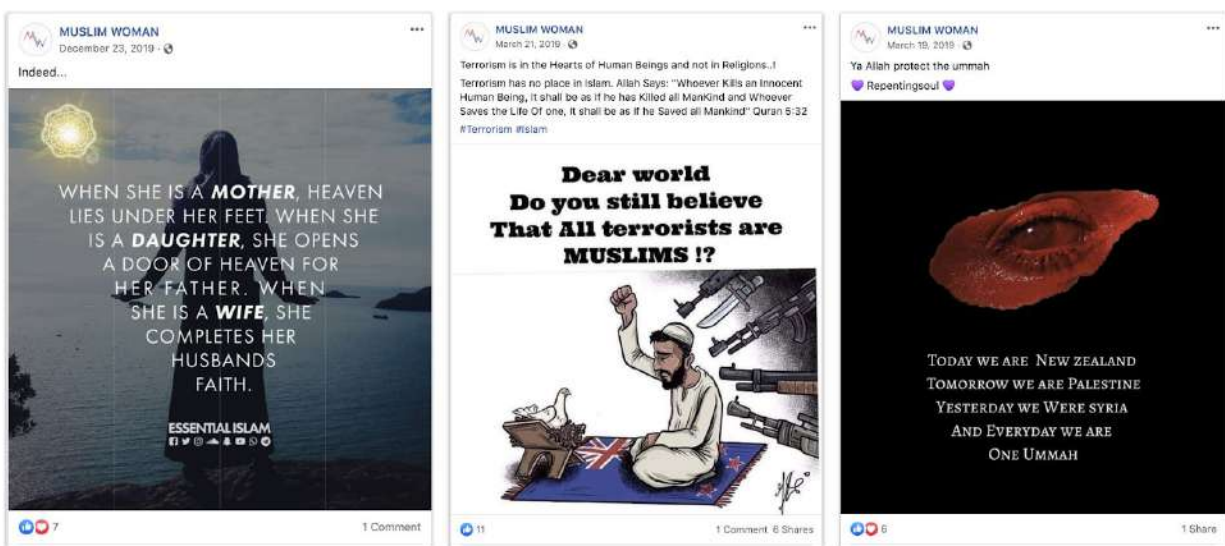


Posts by the “learn the Persian language” page, April 2020. On the left, posts showing items of vocabulary in Persian; on the right, the same posts showing the translations.

One Facebook group was called ShiaLive.tv. It offered interpretations of Shia religious thought: “Before studying Shi’a doctrines or practices, it is necessary to know the sources on which the Shi’a rely for understanding Islam.” The Facebook group was created on April 29, 2012, and a website with the same name was created the following April; the domain was allowed to lapse in February 2014.

Some of the longer-lasting English-language assets had a similar vocation: they posted religious commentary on modern-day issues for both men and women, including advice on behavior and relationships. Sometimes they commented on breaking world events, notably the murder by a white supremacist of 51 Muslim worshipers in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019. They tended not to mention Iran specifically: they took a more general tone and largely stayed away from direct political or geopolitical commentary or confrontation.

Such behavior fits within IRIB's role as the national broadcaster of a rigidly Islamic state: the messaging itself would not have looked out of place on official state channels. In this case, IRIB appears to have viewed its covert accounts as one more way of getting the same message across.



*English-language posts by the page "Muslim Woman," promoting a specific view of women in Islam, and reacting to the murder of 51 Muslim worshipers in Christchurch, New Zealand, by a white supremacist gunman, March 2019.*

Some of the network's content was even more innocuous and was likely an attempt at online audience building. The most popular page in the network was a video-focused channel called @v1online. This specialized in viral video content, typically copied from elsewhere and watermarked as such, featuring small children, animals, entertaining accidents (entertaining, at least, for the person filming them), and feel-good stories about disabled people overcoming their disabilities. This page had the highest number of followers of any in the set, at 59,445, although it only had 17,446 likes, suggesting that its audience was largely not engaged with it. Sometimes it amplified other pages in the network: it appears likely to have been intended as an amplifier, attracting viewers with innocuous content and then steering them toward content that was more important for the IRIB network.



*Human-interest posts from the page @v1online, a page that primarily posted feel-good and comic videos from other sources. The woman on the left is about to discover why it is important to secure the lid of the blender before turning it on; the man on the right is displaying his sporting abilities in defiance of his disability.*

Despite the volume of innocuous content, this was a deceptive network. Some of its assets, especially those that focused on news and current events, claimed to be independent news outlets, a theme that has often emerged in previous information operations, both Iranian and Russian. Almost none of the assets mentioned any affiliation with IRIB, even when they repeatedly amplified its content. Many of the accounts, especially those that claimed English-language identities, had taken their profile pictures from elsewhere online. This marks the network as covert, deceptive, and ultimately inauthentic.

About

Suggest Edits

BUSINESS INFO

Started on September 1, 2017

CONTACT INFO

m.me/qawem.online

http://www.facebook.com/qawem.online

qawem\_online

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MORE INFO

About

#قاوم\_اونلاين قاوم حيث انت شبكة أخبارية مستقلة تعنى بالشأن العام... في سورية.. المصداقية...مساندة الضعفاء... شعار لنا

Media/News Company

ENGLISH

SPANISH

ARABIC

# Resist online, resist where you are an independent news network that deals with public affairs in Syria ... credibility ... supporting the weak ... a slogan for us ...

"An independent news network that deals with public affairs in Syria": the About section for the page @Qawem.Online (Resist Online), part of the IRIB network.

Mary White

September 26, 2012 ·

Hello, my friend. I'm Block. Please introduce me to your friend now. Add me to.. thanxxxxxxxxxxxx my friend kssssssss

Google

irina antónenko

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Ирина Антоненко (44 ф... funart.pro

Фото красивых девуше... tarina.ucoz.ru

Ирина Антоненко выш... e1.ru

Pin on GORGEOUS FACES pinterest.fr

Irina Antonenko Pictures ... hotnessrater.com

Picture of Irina Antonenko listal.com

Left, the account "Mary White," run by the network in 2012. Right, [Irina Antonenko](#), Miss Russia 2010.

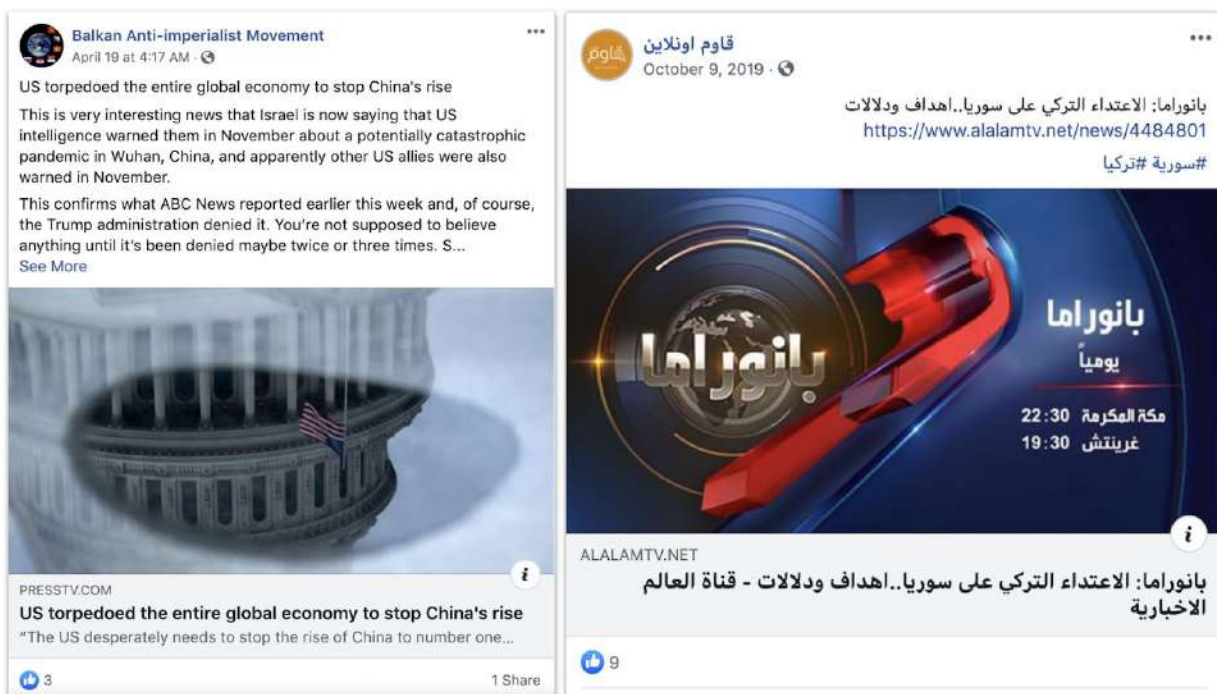
Graphika

13

## Amplifying State Outlets

One of the network's effects was to amplify Iranian state media from ostensibly independent accounts. This is a pattern of behavior that has been observed in previous Iranian operations, especially from the IUVN group, which very largely posted content from IRIB affiliates such as PressTV and the Tehran Times.

Given its emphasis on working in Arabic, the IRIB network shared more content from IRIB affiliate Al-Alam TV than it did from PressTV, but both outlets still featured among its content. A handful of accounts also posted in Bosnian, and they repeatedly served up articles from IRIB's Bosnian service, [bosnian.trib.ir](https://www.bosnian.trib.ir/).



Shares of articles by PressTV, left, and Al-Alam TV, right. Both are IRIB affiliates. The right-hand headline reads, "Turkish aggression against Syria ... goals and indications."



*Shares of articles by IRIB's Bosnian service on the pages Sloboda za okupiranu Palestinu (Freedom for occupied Palestine), top, and Vehabizam, šejtanska sekta (Wahhabism, a Satanic sect), bottom. The upper headline reads, "Zionist soldiers wounded 12 Palestinians in El Halil," the lower headline reads, "A strange and frightening ISIS fatwa in Mosul." The Freedom for occupied Palestine page was created in August 2011 and stopped posting in August 2014.*

Strangely, in late 2019 and early 2020, the network's assets also promoted the Arabic-language service of the Kremlin outlet Sputnik. This was not merely a question of sharing content from the Russian broadcaster, but of promoting it as "The best & strongest tv news channel in the Arab world."



Promotion of Sputnik's Arabic service on Telegram by two of the IRIB operation's assets, @qawem.online (left, October 2019) and @v1online (January 2020). These were two of the network's more popular assets, with a combined following of around 70,000.

That a covert network run by Iran's state broadcaster chose to advertise an overt network run by Russia's state broadcaster is noteworthy, but too slender a lead to carry interpretation at this stage.

## Politics and Geopolitics

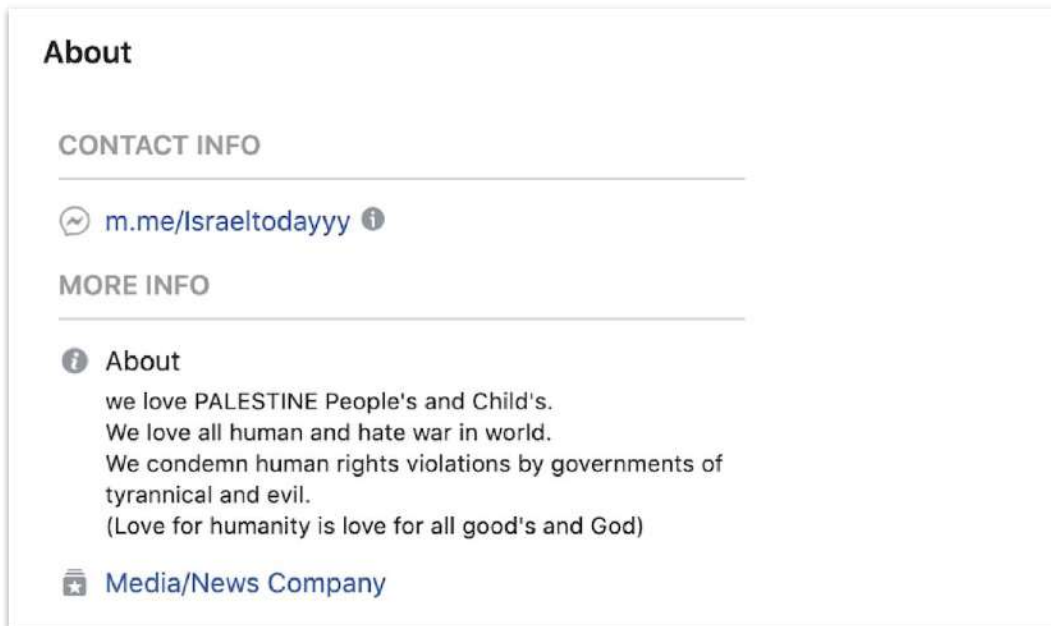
Between its innocuous, public-service and audience-building posts, the network shared a high volume of content that focused on geopolitical issues of direct relevance to the Iranian regime. The network was particularly hostile toward Israel and Saudi Arabia - more so than toward the United States - across the broad sweep of time and languages that the network covered. Many assets referred to these countries, and some were focused directly on them.

For example, one Arabic-language page was called "Saudi opposition and free speech page." Its About section described it as a "Private page of Saudi revolutionaries that transmits the truth to the outside and to anyone who is looking for the truth, in order to free the country [Saudi Arabia] from the [House of] Saud, may they be cursed by God." It was mainly active in 2014-2015, with one outlying post in 2019, and it attacked the House of Saud with a range of memes and texts.



Graphics by the page "Saudi opposition and free speech page" attacking the Saudi royal family, including for their relationship with the United States and Israel. The page was active sporadically from April 2011 to January 2015, with an outlying post in October 2019.

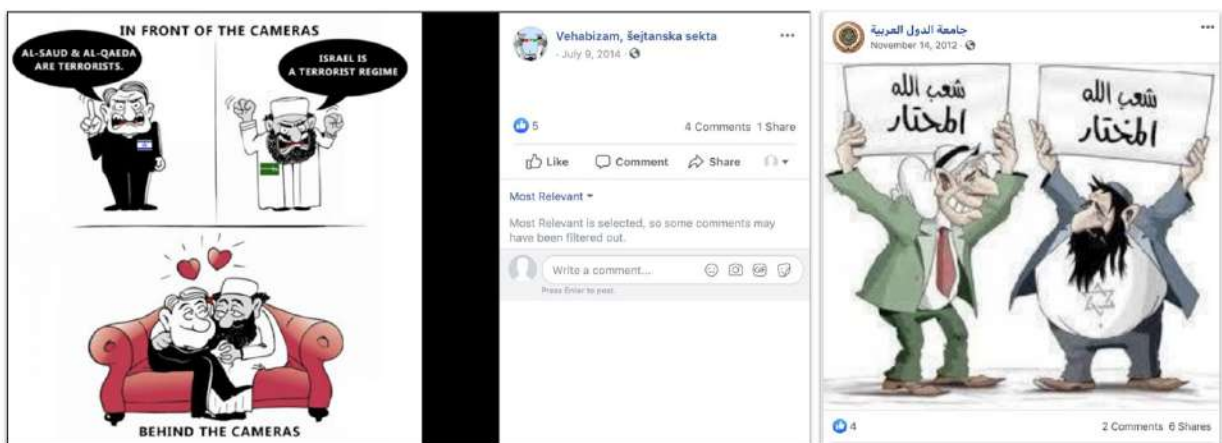
This hostility to Saudi Arabia and Israel spread across languages and was a feature throughout the network's existence. It was overt and often crude: one page in Bosnian was called "Wahhabism, a Satanic sect," and an English-language page called "Israel Today" featured a bio that was very much in line with the Iranian regime's messaging.



The About page for "Israel Today." Note the broken English, and also the claim to be a "Media/News Company," with no reference to IRIB, typical of this network.



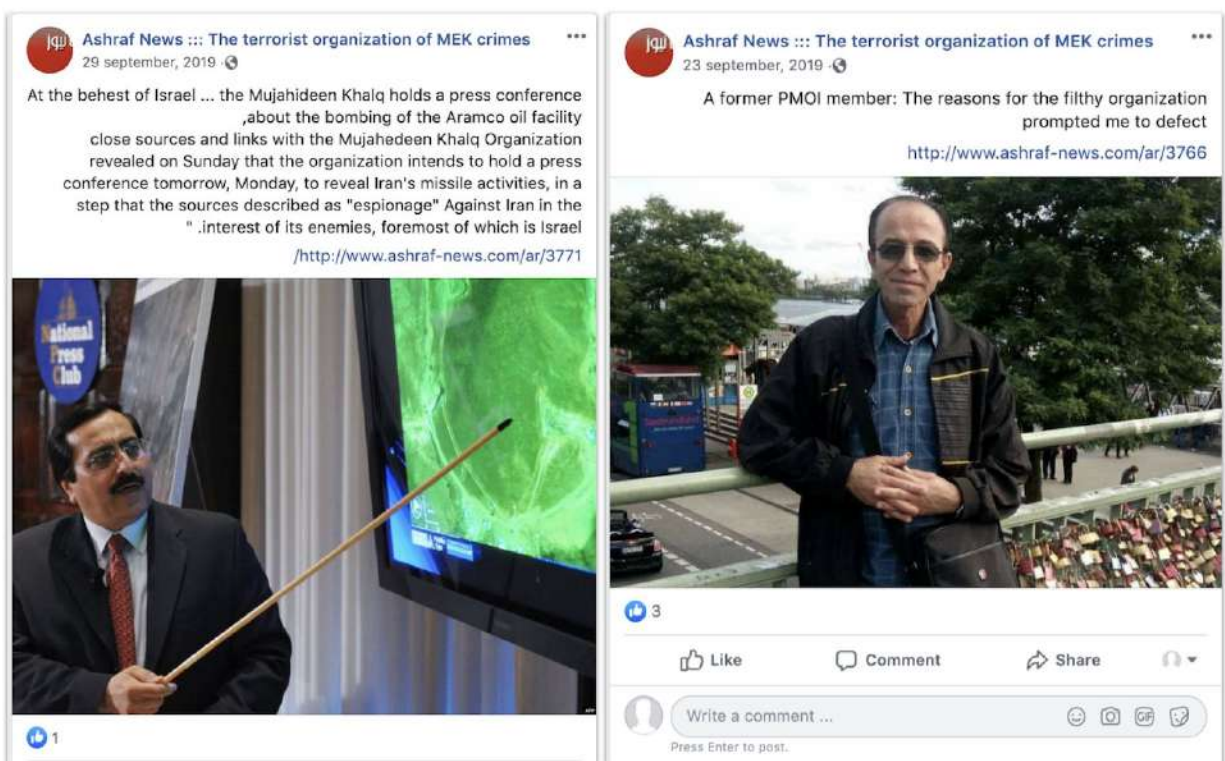
Graphics by three pages in the set. Left, Bosnian page “Vehabizam, šejtanska sekta” (Wahhabism, a Satanic sect), quoting Ayatollah Khamenei as saying, “The only ones who look forward to these developments in Iraq are the Zionist regime and its supporters.” Center, cartoon portraying Saudi Arabia as a treacherous and dangerous partner. Right, English-language page “Israel Today,” active from April 2012 to February 2016.



Posts by pages “Vehabizam, šejtanska sekta” (Wahhabism, a Satanic sect) and @ArabLeagueOnline, attacking the Saudis and Israel as closet allies. The page on Wahhabism was active from late May to September 2014. The “Arab League” page was active for one day in November 2012.

A page and related website in the network that were active from September to November 2019 focused on the [Mujahedin-e Khalq \(MEK\)](#) group, or People's Mujahedin of Iran. This is an Iranian opposition movement that was initially formed in 1965. It participated in the overthrow of the Shah and the Iranian Revolution in 1979, but ideological differences soon led to the group's banishment from Iran. As a result, it sided with Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, establishing bases within Iraq, including Camp Ashraf. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the group was forced to agree to the disarmament of its [military branch](#).

Between 1997 and 2012, many Western nations designated MEK as a terrorist organization, but by the end of 2012, only Iran and Iraq still considered them to be connected to terrorist activity. The current hub of MEK activity is based in Albania. MEK's current allegiances are a hotly contested topic. Members of the Trump administration, including former National Security Advisor John Bolton and current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have been vocal supporters of MEK, leading to accusations of [more direct US material support](#); MEK or former members have also [been accused](#) of conducting misinformation campaigns to benefit the current Iranian regime. Most recently, former members of MEK have said that "Heshmat Alavi," who has authored anti-Iranian regime articles in numerous western journals, was a [MEK persona created for the purposes of propaganda](#). [The Intercept claimed](#) that Forbes reporting on Alavi's articles played a role in the Trump administration's sanctions against Iran. Facebook's takedown reveals yet another facet of the Iranian state's response to the MEK group.



Posts by the Arabic-language page whose name translates as "Ashraf News: The crimes of the terrorist organization MEK," auto-translated. The MEK group was the main theme of both the Facebook page and the associated website, [ashraf-news\[.\]com](http://ashraf-news.com). The name "Ashraf News" references MEK's former presence in Iraq.

The IRIB network sometimes posted about Iran's direct geopolitical concerns, notably its long-running nuclear negotiations with international powers in the so-called "5+1" format. (The 5+1 are the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany). Such posts were only a minority of the content reviewed by Graphika.



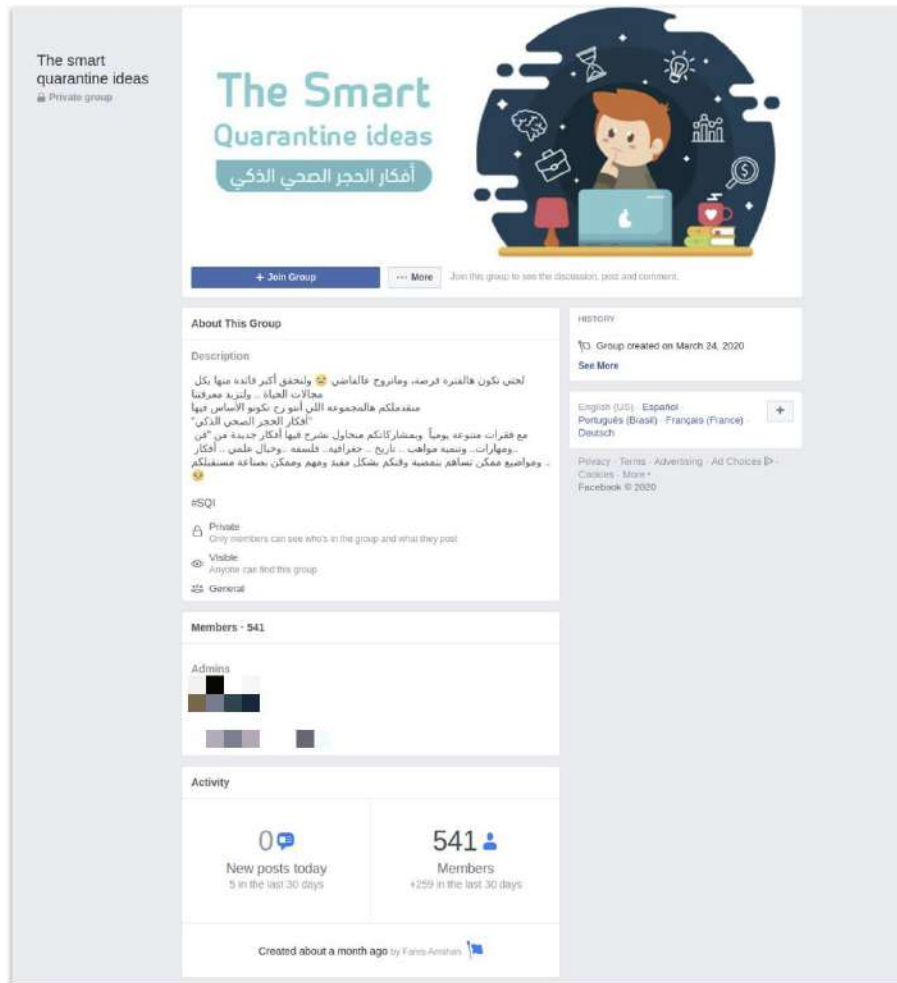
Early post on the 5+1 process from the network's page "Political cartoons" in 2012.

## Coronavirus Coverage

In 2020, as Iran struggled with the outbreak of the novel coronavirus COVID-19, the IRIB network began inserting coronavirus-related messaging into its content. Like the earlier content on the nuclear negotiations and deal, this was never a majority of the output. Such content as there was largely portrayed the virus in a geopolitical light, either seeing it as an attack by a foreign enemy (usually Israel) or a reason to lift sanctions on Iran and its allies, notably Syria. One recent private group was focused on "smart quarantine ideas" and may have taken a less geopolitical stance.



Posts by the page Balkan Anti-Imperialist Movement (left) and غصن الزيتون (Olive Branch) (right) on the geopolitics of coronavirus.



The "Smart Quarantine Ideas" private group, created March 24, 2020.

## Targeting the West, 2012-2014

Perhaps the strangest, though certainly not the most viral, aspect of the IRIB network was its early attempt to interfere in Western political processes using inauthentic accounts on social media, well before Russia's Internet Research Agency began its large-scale posting. This manifested in what appear to have been short-lived experiments in early 2012, and again in 2014, masquerading as English-speaking users in Western countries to focus on specific political moments. We consider it likely that this activity was experimental because it involved small numbers of assets, was limited in time, did not score substantial engagement, and was not (to our knowledge) repeated on a larger scale later.

This activity focused briefly on three main topics: the Republican primaries of early 2012, the Occupy movement of the same period, and the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. In each case, the network used a combination of fake accounts, pages, and groups to push its messaging, with the fake accounts sharing and promoting the pages and groups. Rather than the

website-heavy content of later efforts, this was much more based on visuals, particularly cartoons. None of these posts yielded major viral impact, measured in likes or shares, and some of the pages were abandoned after only a few days.

For the 2012 election, the network focused on promoting Republican challenger Ron Paul, singling him out as a critic of Israel, and mocking his Republican rivals, especially Mitt Romney.



*Cartoon by Anonymous via Ron Paul, a page that was sporadically active from January 2012 to January 2013, portraying Paul as critical of Israel, "unlike other members of his party."*



*Cartoons mocking Mitt Romney from the page Political Cartoons, active May 27-29, 2012.*



Banner of a group run by the network Global Campaign for Ron Paul.

The network also attacked then-US President Barack Obama and portrayed him as the chief beneficiary of the Republican contest. These posts were sporadic and did not yield high numbers of likes or shares.

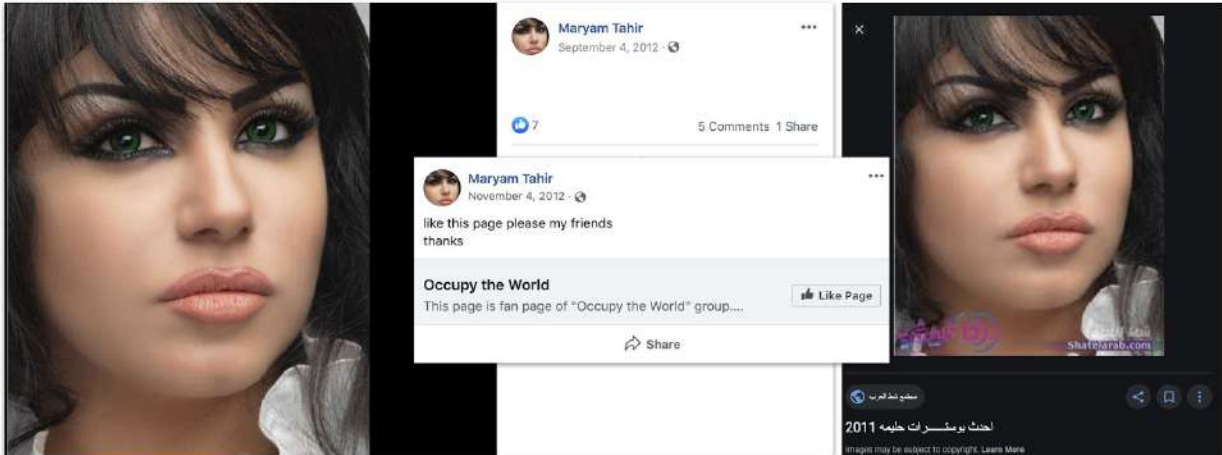


Cartoons featuring Obama and the Republican contenders, February to May 2012.

Over the same period, the network ran a number of personas that focused on the Occupy movement. As with other accounts, this featured a number of profile pictures, especially of young women, that were taken from easily identifiable online sources. The messaging largely reflected the Occupy movement's own concerns, with a focus on the evils of large-scale capitalism and a strong focus on police violence against the protesters. This may have represented Iran's attempt to use the opportunity to portray the United States in a particularly bad light after the Western focus on the Green Revolution in Iran that started in 2009.

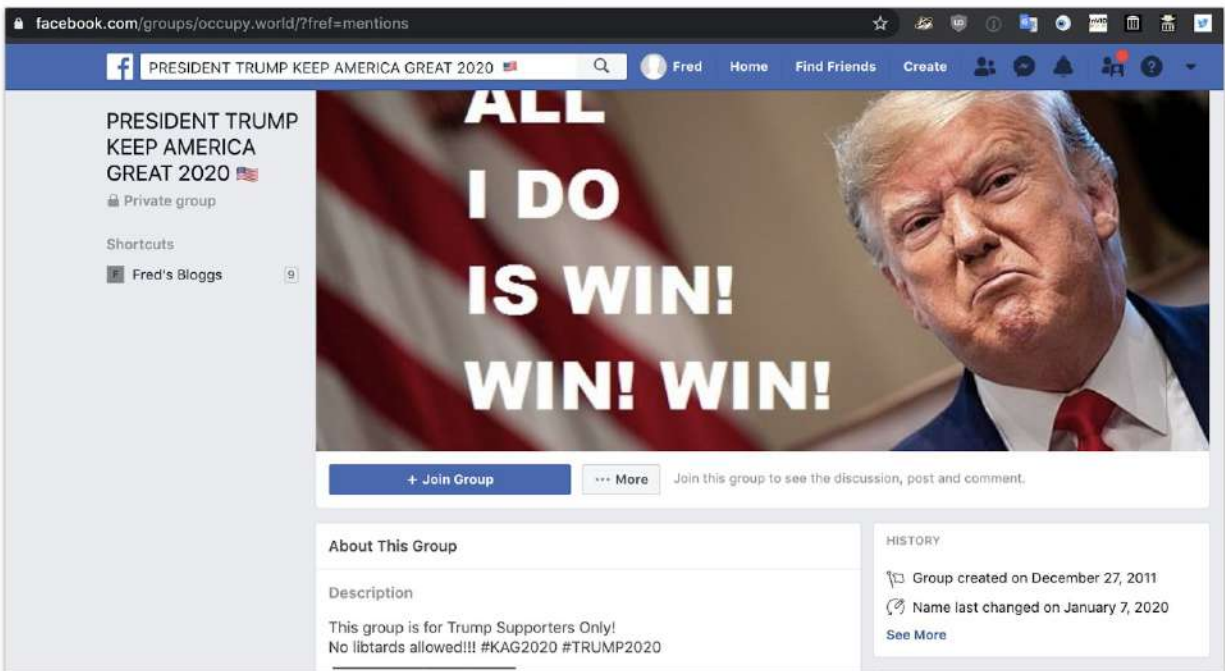


Posts by the operation's accounts and groups on the Occupy movement in 2012. Top, the banner of account Anna Norton with the slogan Occupy Grand Rapids. Left center and bottom, two posts by the Occupy-themed page My Hero. Right, one of several Occupy cartoons posted by account Barbara Taylor. We have obscured the profile images, which appear to have been taken from private individuals.

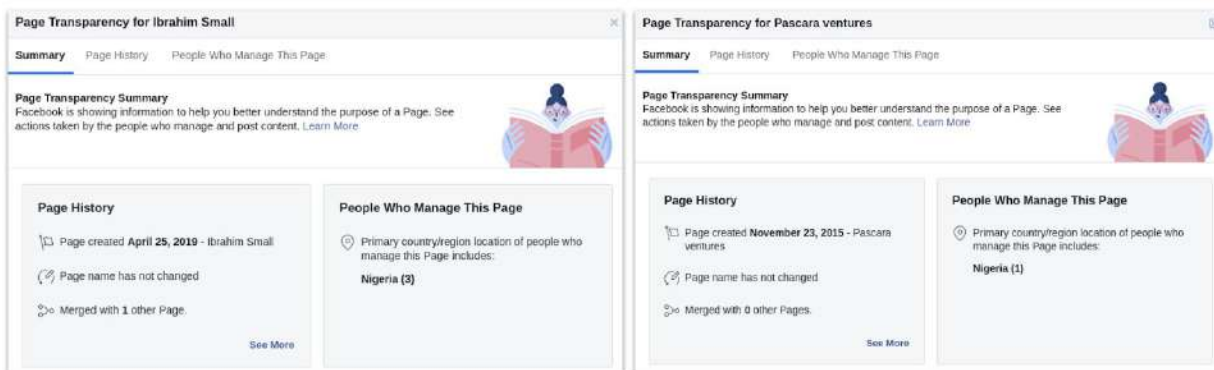


Left, the operation account Maryam Tahir in 2012. Facebook identified the account as part of this operation. Right, the profile picture on a beauty website. Inset, the account promoting a page called Occupy the World.

Unusually, one of the Occupy-focused groups shifted its identity in early 2020 to become a page supporting President Trump, complete with his re-election slogan, “Keep America Great.” The group was private, so it was not possible to verify its content or posting history, but as of April 2020, it was primarily managed by a group of users and pages based in Nigeria.



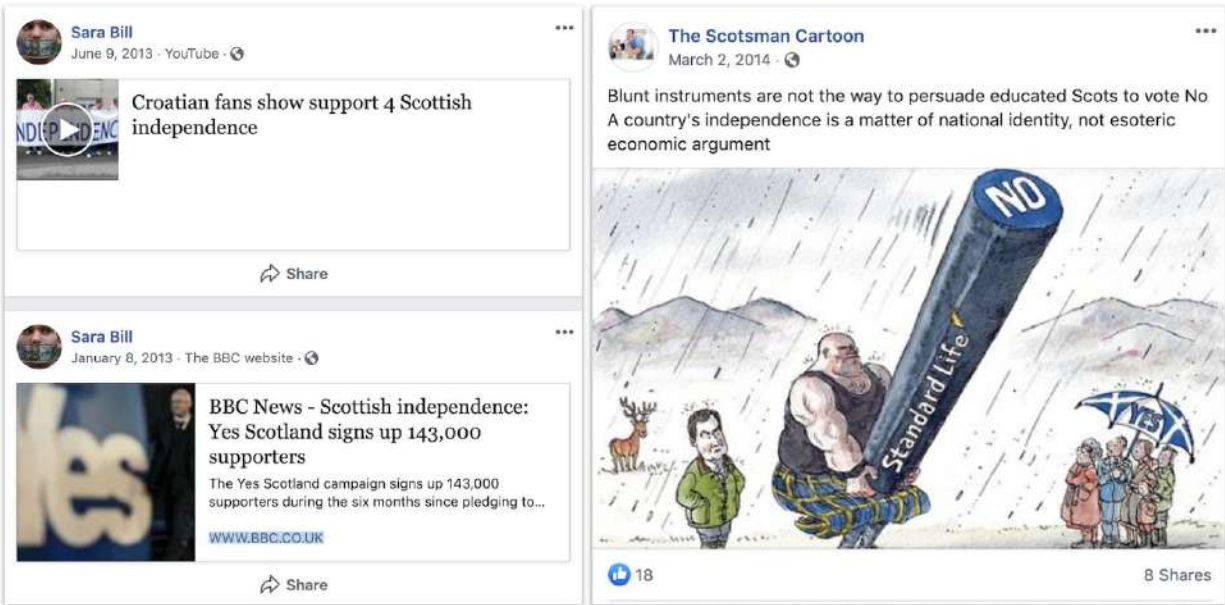
The page formerly known as occupy.world (as shown in its URL), now PRESIDENT TRUMP KEEP AMERICA GREAT 2020. The name was changed on January 7, 2020.



*Transparency settings for the pages that managed the Trump group, showing their location in Nigeria.*

It is unclear whether the group remained in the hands of the IRIB operators and was re-branded with the 2020 election in mind, or whether it was somehow acquired by operators in Nigeria and re-purposed for unknown reasons.

The Iranian network tried one final piece of political targeting in the West in late 2013 and early 2014. This revolved around an account called Sara Bill that also posted about the Occupy movement, and a single page called The Scotsman Cartoon, most likely named to resemble leading Scottish daily The Scotsman. The page offered a series of cartoons in a wide range of visual styles but on a common theme: Scotland's need for independence. Many of the cartoons attacked then-Prime Minister David Cameron, portraying him as the embodiment of English oppression.



Left, posts by operation account Sara Bill on Scottish independence and popular support, both domestic and international, for the Yes campaign (in favor of independence). Right, page The Scotsman Cartoon, criticizing the economic argument for the Union. The page was active from October 2013 to March 2014 and stopped posting six months before the referendum.



Posts by The Scotsman Cartoon lampooning Cameron as robbing and fooling Scotland, February-March 2014.

None of these posts achieved viral impact, measured in the number of likes, shares, or comments. Typical posts scored a few dozen reactions, sometimes a little over 100. This is not negligible, but it is a long way away from being an effort on the sort of scale that might have had an impact on the referendum. In March 2014, six months before the Scottish referendum, the cartoons page stopped posting, for unknown reasons.

## Websites

As with other Iranian covert influence efforts, the IRIB network centered on a number of websites and often used its social media assets to steer users toward them. Some of these were only active in 2012-2014 and have left little trace online; others, notably [africa-press\[.\]com](http://africa-press[.]com), were more recent creations and appeared to be in audience-building mode at the time of the takedown.

Those websites that are still available offer further insights into the network, both by illustrating the way it behaved and by reinforcing the attribution to Iranian state actors through technical information. In general, most of the websites that claimed to be independent news outlets in fact copied their content from elsewhere, either Iranian government outlets or genuine local news outlets that they copied without attribution.



Front page of Africa-press.com, with all the domestic web sections supposedly available per language

By May 2020, the most wide-ranging and prolific website in the network was africa-press[.]com. This was registered anonymously via Domains by Proxy on January 2, 2017. The website offered content in Arabic, English, and French and ostensibly covered 49 countries across Africa - 10 in Arabic, 19 in English, and 20 in French. However, the coverage was patchy, and much of its content was copied from other sources that focused on local politics rather than amplifying Iranian state outlets or posting original content. This type of behavior is usually associated with assets that are trying to build an audience and market share but that lack the resources to produce a high volume of their own content. It is not a sign of malicious activity in itself, but in the

context of a known covert Iranian asset, it suggests a desire to blend in while attracting readers with genuine, unattributed news.

In French, only Senegal and Mali had dedicated sections. The Mali one was almost empty, with only five articles published in a span of ten days, between July 8 and July 18, 2019. The Senegal section of the website was more furnished than the Malian one but displayed unusual posting patterns for an ostensibly “news” website: some weeks, no articles were posted at all, but a significant number of articles were posted on some days. By May 2020, only 3 of its 11 subsections were still active, Politics, Community, and Sports. The others were abandoned between July and December 2019. Sometimes, the same content was posted several times in a row a day or more apart:



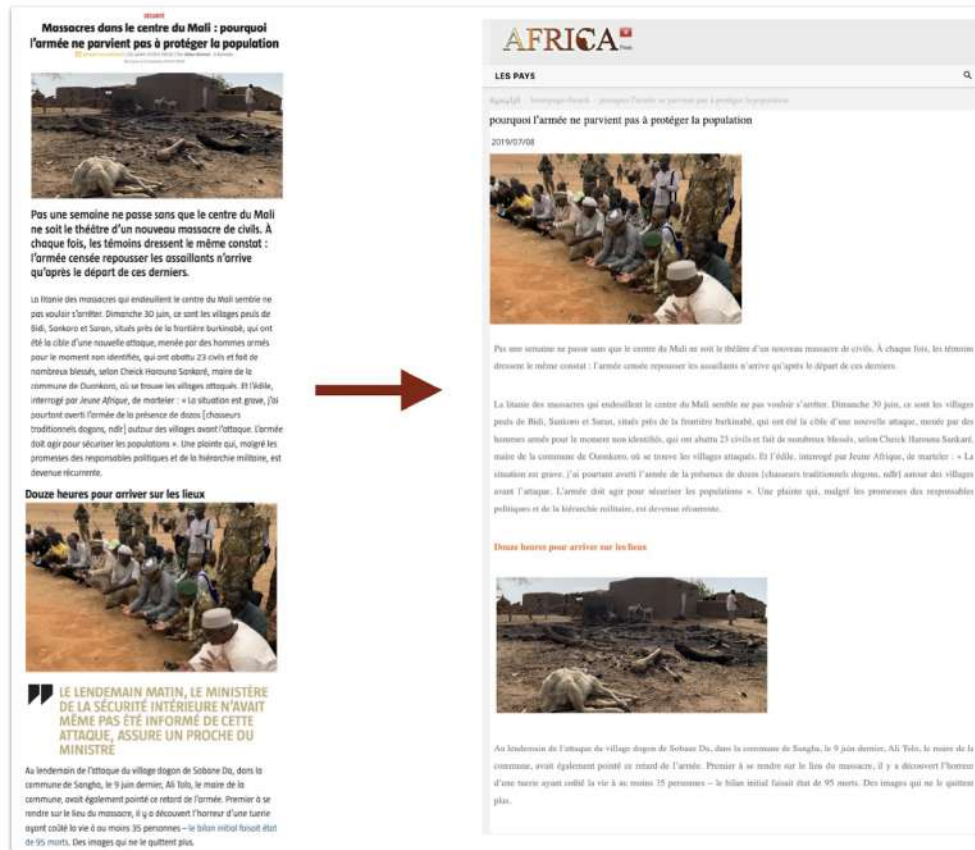
*The same post two days running on the Senegal section of the website. The headline runs, "Council of Ministers: Mbaye Ndiaye, Mahmoud Saleh and Marième Badiane fired."*

In English, 7 of the 19 countries listed actually had content dedicated to them. These were Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Gambia, and Kenya. Like the Senegalese section, the English-speaking outlets posted a significant volume of content, often several times a day, but the sections on Ghana and Gambia stopped posting on December 31, 2019 and the Sierra Leone section last posted on January 9, 2020.

In Arabic, the sections dedicated to Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, and Algeria all featured quantities of content, some of it dating back to the website's earliest days in 2018. All were still active as of May 2020, suggesting that, as with the balance of languages demonstrated by the Facebook pages, Arabic content was the operation's main concern.

## Copying Content

Across its languages, the website copied content from other sources but seldom acknowledged the fact. For example, all but one of the stories on the Mali section (in French) were copied from genuine outlets.

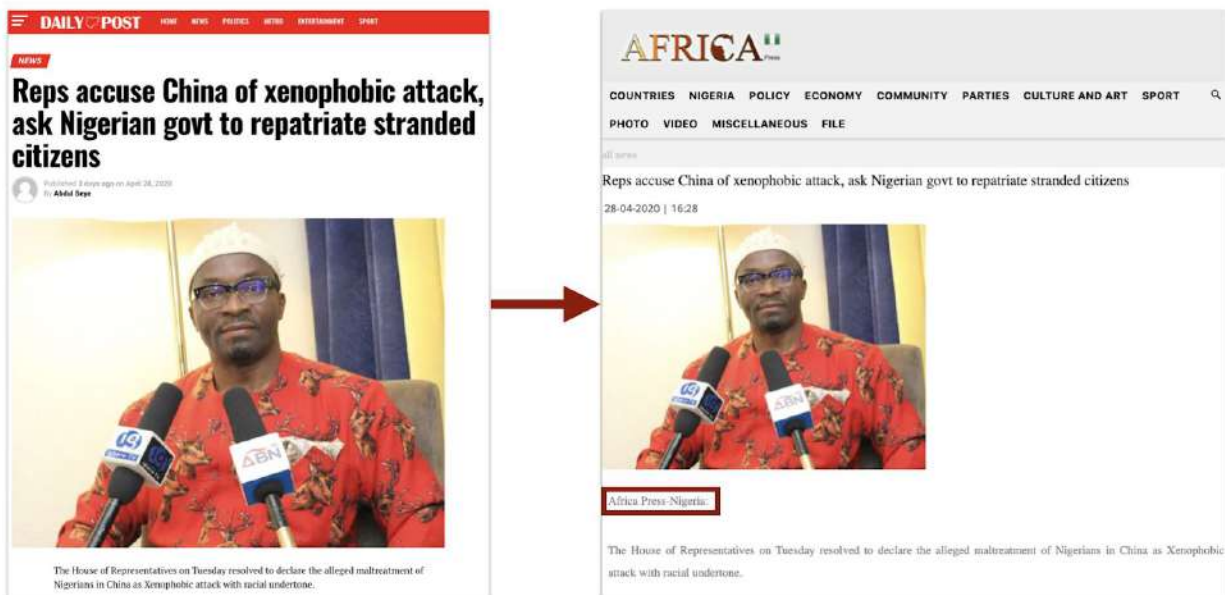


On the left, the copied extract of the source article published on [JeuneAfrique](https://www.jeuneafrique.com) and on the right, a copy of the three first paragraphs in Africa Press. As visible above, apart from copying only the beginning of the article, only minor edits were made to make the article look different: the headline was truncated, and the order of the pictures included in the JeuneAfrique article was inverted.

The Senegal-focused page mostly shared domestic political news, primarily replicated from the Senegal news website Seneweb. The africa-news[.]com version regularly omitted the attribution, but other websites that also copied the article provided the source link, confirming the identification.



The English websites also took their articles from various local outlets: Africa-Press Nigeria mostly took content from the information outlet Dailypost.ng but claimed the articles as its own. Using the same tactic, the Tanzanian web section duplicated content almost exclusively from Dailynews.co.tz but placed it under its own name, and the Kenyan web section took its content from Standardmedia.co.ke.



Example of stolen content [Africa-Press Nigeria](#) credited as its own. Original from [DailyPost.ng](#).

In Arabic, the same pattern held true, with the website largely copying its content from elsewhere online. Sometimes the sharing was from local websites, presumably in an attempt to create the impression of local knowledge. For example, on January 3, 2020, the Sudan section published an article whose headline translates as “[Trump: The US are Sudan’s steadfast partner to guarantee the country’s thriving and democratic future](#).” This had appeared the day before on two Sudanese outlets, [alsudanalaan.com](#) and [rinasnews.net](#). Similarly, on February 4, 2020, the Algeria section published an article headlined, “[The Arab Summit in Algeria ... and a country of martyrs capable of controlling the ‘Steadfastness and Confrontation Front’](#)”; the same article ran on the local site [echoroukonline.com](#) the day before.

Occasionally, the Arabic section re-posted articles from international sources, such as [Al Jazeera](#), [Russia’s RT](#), and the Iranian [Al-Alam TV](#). This did not appear to be systematic, unlike the Iranian IUVN operation, which systematically boosted Iranian state outlets without attribution.

## Political Orientation

Unlike the Facebook assets described above, the Africa-Press set of websites did not take a particular political orientation. In Arabic, for example, a number of articles reported on the United States in a neutral or mildly positive manner, while one [article](#) on the Libya-focused section in February 2019 even reported that Facebook had taken down another Iranian operation. (Facebook [announced](#) the takedown on January 31, 2019.) The tone of this article was strictly factual; it was copied from Jordan-based Libyan news outlet [218 TV](#).

The English and French websites also took an impartial approach. For instance, the Senegalese web section alternated content that criticized and praised Senegalese President Macky Sall. Some articles portrayed Sall as a corrupt politician, and others presented him as the savior of Senegal. Opposition figure Abdoul Mbaye received similar treatment.



*Example of contradictory content duplicated on the website: on the left, the headline translates "Forgotten from talk with the opposition in the Presidential house, Abdoul Mbaye writes to Macky and gives him advice" ([Seneweb](#)) and on the right "Presidential house's audience: Abdoul Mbaye stood Macky up, making people angry" ([Seneweb](#)).*

## Coronavirus-Related Content

Those web sections that were still active in April 2020 provided some coverage of the coronavirus outbreak, but their coverage maintained the pattern of balanced (and usually copied) reporting. They also published some articles covering alternative treatments against COVID-19 and some reporting on Chinese [aid supplies](#) to Africa.

## Commande d'Artemisia: Le contenu des échanges entre Macky et Andry Rajoelina

2020/04/28



Comme l'annonçait Seneweb, le chef de l'État sénégalais Macky Sall a appelé, hier vendredi par vidéoconférence, son homologue malgache, Andry Rajoelina, pour le "féliciter" après la découverte du remède traditionnel amélioré dénommé "Covid-Organics" fait à base d'Artemisia. Dans cette vidéo dévoilant le contenu des échanges entre les deux Présidents, Andry Rajoelina a expliqué que cette tisane a été déjà utilisée par les Chinois, depuis plus de 2 mille ans et qui a surtout fait ses preuves pendant la guerre du Vietnam. "Avec le Covid-19, nos scientifiques l'ont déjà étudiée dans les laboratoires. Et ça a commencé à donner des résultats probants", a déclaré le chef de l'État malgache. Un bref exposé après lequel, le Président Macky Sall a passé une commande auprès de son homologue demandant la livraison d'"un échantillon" à mettre à la disposition du service des maladies infectieuses de l'hôpital Fann de Dakar.

"Artemisia order: what did Macky and Andry Rajoelina talk about" - the article, traced back to [Seneweb](#), states that Macky Sall called the President of Madagascar to congratulate him on finding a cure for coronavirus. It also stated that Senegalese President ordered some "Covid Organics" - the name of the so-called remedy promoted by Rajoelina, supposed to cure COVID19 - for Dakar's Fann hospital.

**AFRICA**Press


COUNTRIES TANZANIA POLICY ECONOMY COMMUNITY PARTIES CULTURE AND ART SPORT

PHOTO VIDEO MISCELLANEOUS FILES

all news

**STEAM THERAPY CITED AS HELPFUL**

30-04-2020 | 21:43



AfricaPress-Tanzania: EXPERTS on traditional medicines have supported the government position on the use of alternative remedies, including steam inhalation therapy, to fight coronavirus infection, calling upon the public to seek advice from the practitioners on proper use of the medicines.

Article promoting alternative medicine to fight coronavirus on Africa Press Tanzania. The content was traced back to [dailynews.co.tz](#)

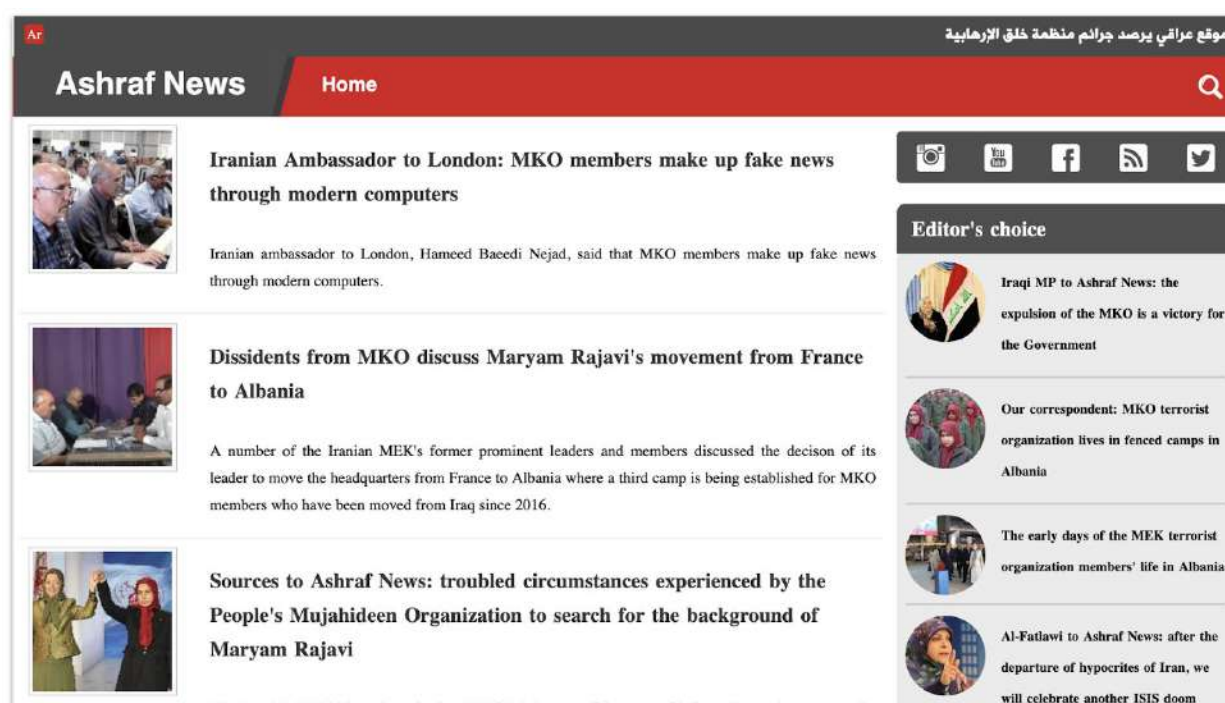
Africa-Press[.]com is unusual among known and suspected Iranian operations. All the related Facebook assets that showed a manager location were run from Iran (often with one administrator in Italy for good measure), but the website seemed more concerned with copying genuine reporting from other outlets than with amplifying Iranian state narratives and outlets. This suggests that it was an attempt to build an audience and had not yet been operationalized with more direct Iranian messaging.

## Other Domains

The Iranian operation pointed to a number of other domains at various times in its history, although many of those were inactive by the time of the takedown.

### Ashraf-news[.]com

Two of the given Facebook pages linked to ashraf-news[.]com, a nominally Iraqi news outlet. Like the related pages, this website focused exclusively on the MEK group. It featured posts in both Arabic and English and routinely portrayed the MEK group as aggressive and treacherous.



Headlines from the English section of ashraf-news.com, showing the focus on MEK (usually referred to as MKO on the site, for Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, but sometimes termed PMO, People's Mujahedin Organization).

The domain was registered in 2011. It initially claimed a location in Germany, then, from late 2013, a location in Iraq. Both addresses appeared to be deceptive: they gave the name "ashraf" for both

the registrant and the city and a postal code of 01234, which does not match any known [Iraqi postcode](#) or [German postcode](#). Despite the stated locations, the earliest versions of the site credited an Iranian web design company for its creation. After an update of the Whois information on December 1, 2017, the registration switched to Iran, with few other details provided.

Domain Name: ASHRAF-NEWS.COM	Registrant Name: ashraf
Registrant: ashraf-news ashraf No 157, Safaeye Ave ashraf ashraf, 01234 DE Tel. +49.9831000000 Fax. +49.9831000000	Registrant Organization: ashraf-news Registrant Street1: iraq Registrant City: ashraf Registrant State: Baghdad Registrant Postal Code: 01234 Registrant Country: IQ Registrant Phone: +964.31000000 Registrant Fax: +964.31000000 Registrant Email: [REDACTED]

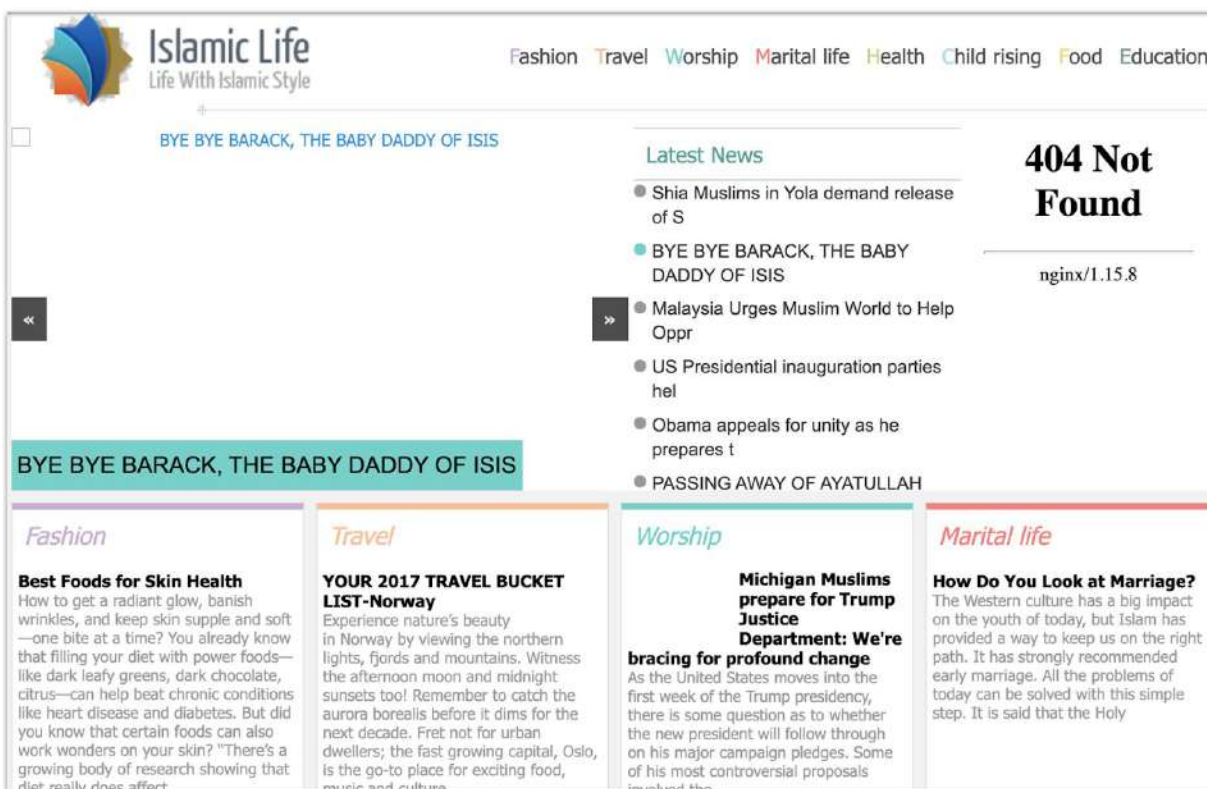
*Whois lookup details for ashraf-news.com on December 22, 2011 (left) and November 19, 2013 (right). We have obscured what appears to be personal information.*

The website's content in Arabic reproduced the positions of the Iranian government. One [article](#) headlined, "Maryam Rajavi holds a meeting in Albania after the assassination of Qasem Suleiymani" called the head of the organization, Maryam Rajavi, a terrorist (الإرهابية مريم رجوي), in line with the Iranian government's designation. [Another](#), headlined "A former leader uncovers money laundering in the organization Mujahedi Khalq," suggested the organization is funded by Saudi Arabia.

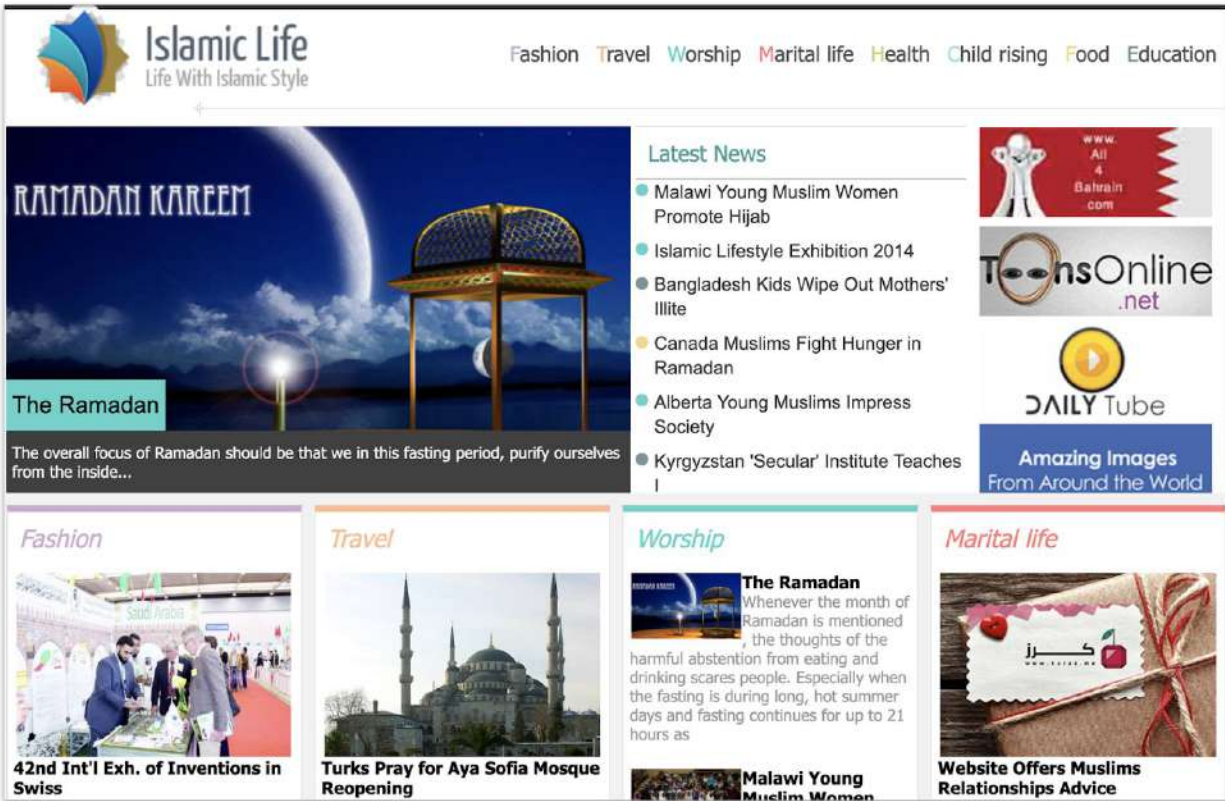
The [article](#) "The Iranian Ambassador in London: members of the Mujahedi Khalq Organization are falsifying news and creating fake news thanks to modern computers" quoted the Iranian ambassador to London, who accused MEK members of forging and disseminating fake news in order to "poison the world's opinion" (من أجل تسميم الرأي العام). The same article described the organization's (new) computers as being "new weapons" (أسلحة جديدة).

## Islamiclife[.]com

Multiple pages linked to the domain islamiclife[.]com, which is currently for sale. Archive records from the WayBack Machine show that the site was in English, and focused on a range of cultural and religious questions, with a minority of political posts. These promoted points of view that were in line with Iranian foreign policies.



WayBack archive of [islamiclife.com](http://islamiclife.com) taken on January 28, 2017. Note the reference to former president Obama as “the baby daddy of ISIS,” the focus on Shia Muslims, and the mixture of politics with advice on food and early marriage (“all the problems of today can be solved with this simple step”).



WayBack archive of [islamiclife.com](http://islamiclife.com) on August 25, 2014. Note the lack of geopolitical content; note also the links on the right, including [toonsonline.net](http://toonsonline.net), related to assets that also featured in the Facebook takedown.

This site was created in 2002 and appears to have maintained the same ownership since that time. The most recent registrations were done anonymously via Namecheap's WhoisGuard service, but before March 2016, Whois data showed the following:

```
Domain Name: islamiclife.com
Registry Domain ID: 85419917_domain_com-vrsn
Registrar WHOIS Server: whois.realtimeregister.com
Registrar URL: http://www.realtimeregister.com
Updated Date: 2015-06-23T08:46:57Z
Creation Date: 2002-04-09T18:14:32Z
Registrar Registration Expiration Date: 2016-04-09T18:14:32Z
Registrar: REALTIME REGISTER B.V.
Registrar IANA ID: 839
Registrar Abuse Contact Email: abuse[at]realtimeregister.com
Registrar Abuse Contact Phone: +31.384530759
Reseller: Hostcontrol
Domain Status: clientTransferProhibited
Domain Status: ok
Registry Registrant ID:
Registrant Name: Alireza Azadi
Registrant Organization: Sazmane Farhang
Registrant Street: no adress yet
Registrant City: Tehran
Registrant State/Province: Tehran
Registrant Postal Code: 9616765898
Registrant Country: IR
Registrant Phone: +98.9352546183
Registrant Phone Ext:
Registrant Fax:
Registrant Fax Ext:
Registrant Email: mohadesi@mail.com
```

*Whois Data for islamiclife[.]com as of January 31, 2016.*

The registrant organization, Sazmane Farhang, appears to reference the [Islamic Culture and Relations Organization](#), Sazman-i Farhang va Irtebatat-i Islami, a government body dedicated to promoting awareness and understanding of Iran abroad. This again ties islamiclife[.]com in with official Iranian government messaging.

The site used Google Analytics (GA account UA-26499084) but does not appear to have shared the account with any other websites. During its history, the site shared IP overlaps with a number of other, possibly related sites, including toonsonline[.]net, which was also referenced by some of the Facebook assets in the IRIB takedown set.

islamiclife.com	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242	209.95.44.106						198.54.117.244
tazeh.net	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242							
toonsonline.net	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242	209.95.44.106						
albadee.net	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242	209.95.44.106						
raihaneh.com	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242	209.95.44.106						
dailyimage.net	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242	209.95.44.106						
persianmags.com	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242							
al-nimr.tazeh.net		184.107.219.242							
dorj.net	184.107.219.242		184.107.132.242	209.95.44.106					
gaza.tazeh.net	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242							
kherad.me	184.107.219.242	184.107.132.242	209.95.44.106						
alawwal.net		184.107.132.242							

IP address history for islamiclife.com and related sites.

## ToonsOnline[.]net

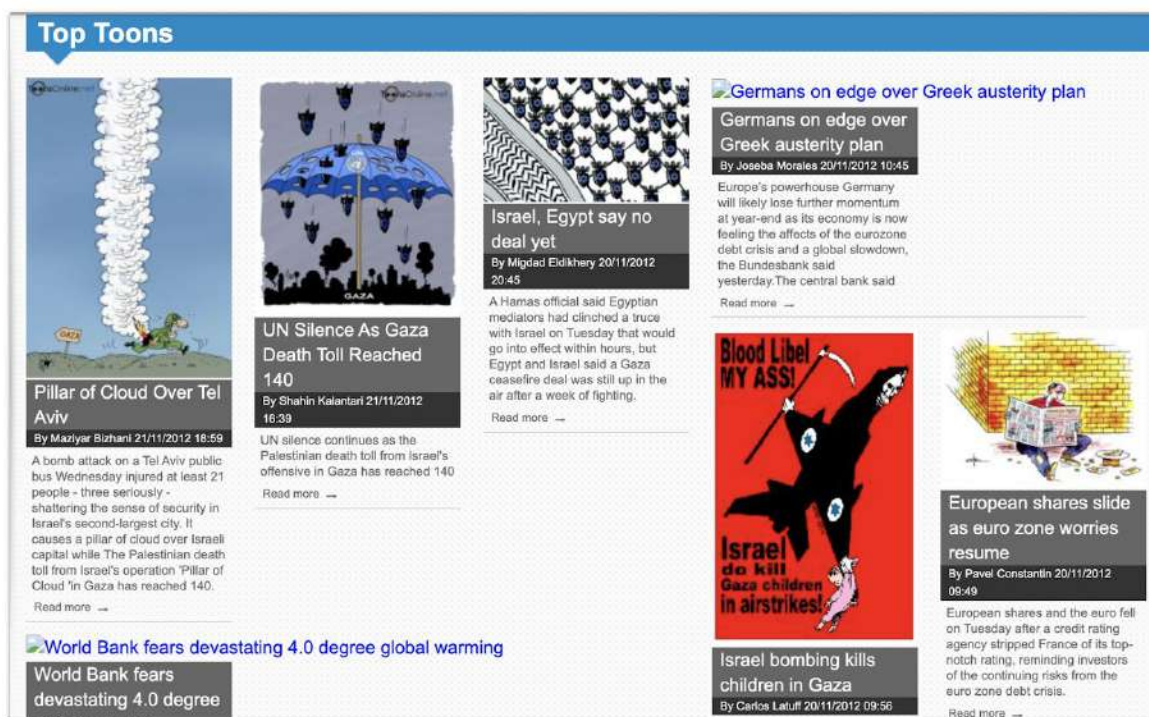
The overlap with IP addresses is not the only fact that binds toonsonline[.]net into this Iranian network: it was also listed by a number of pages in the takedown set as being their URL. As of May 2020, this domain led to an Indonesian gambling site, but in 2012 it led to a website that specialized in English-language political cartoons. One of the Facebook pages, “ToonsOnline fans,” exclusively shared content from the website.

Far more than with islamiclife[.]com, toonsonline[.]net focused on political issues. Not all were relevant to Iranian interests, and the content also included cartoons about football, but a thread of pro-Iranian sentiment linked the posts. This resembles an early attempt at influence by meme and visual content rather than verbal messaging.



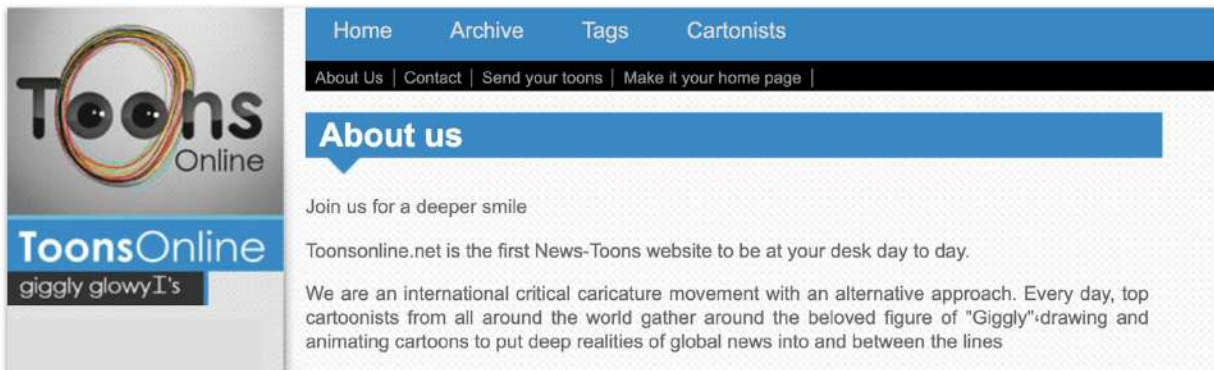
Cartoons by [toonsonline.net](http://toonsonline.net) from a WayBack machine archive taken on May 3, 2012. Note the references to Ramallah and Iran's President Ahmadinejad in the top row.

The Facebook assets involved in this attempt stopped posting in May 2012, but the website itself kept posting long after, periodically taking a more aggressive stance, especially toward Israel.



Cartoons from [November 2012](http://November 2012); note the red cartoon at the bottom referencing the "blood libel," an anti-Semitic fiction with a long history.

The last cartoons were uploaded in [November 2015](#), but according to contemporary archives, none received any comments or likes. The site called itself an “international critical caricature movement,” and it bylined many of its cartoons to artists who are known from other outlets. It made no mention of its funding or organization.



[About Us](#) page for ToonsOnline. In the original, the “Toons” image was animated to blink periodically.

Again, however, historical domain records show that it was registered to the “Sazmane Farhang,” the Iranian government’s public diplomacy organization.

```
Domain Name:toonsonline.net
Name Server:ns2.ertebatdns.com
Name Server:ns1.ertebatdns.com
Created On:2011-04-08 15:24:12.0
Last Updated On:2013-11-12 12:49:40.0
Expiration Date:2014-04-08 15:24:12.0
Sponsoring Registrar:Realtime Register B.V. (R802-LRMS)
Reseller:Realtime Register B.V.
Status:CLIENT_TRANSFER_PROHIBITED
Status:OK
Registrant ID:RC_17860805
Registrant Name:
Registrant Organization:sazmane farhang
Registrant Street1:no adress yet
Registrant City:Tehran
Registrant State:Tehran
Registrant Postal Code:9616765898
Registrant Country:IR
Registrant Phone:+98.88888888
```

*Whois results for toonsonline.net, record from December 11, 2013.*

## Faizun[.]com

The final website for which it has been possible to find online traces was faizun[.]com, linked to by the given Facebook page "Faizun." This is a Bosnian-language website devoted to questions of Islamic behavior and belief, similar in tone to islamiclife[.]com. It was still visible in May 2020, but had not posted since August 2014.



Front page of faizun[.]com as of May 1, 2020, auto-translated from Bosnian. The page was still accessible, but the top article in the "latest topics" section was dated August 23, 2014.

The website's own contact page did not provide any details. The site was registered to an individual in Tehran, but it did not show technical overlaps with other websites associated with the takedown set.

The background of the image is a dark, starry sky. In the lower right quadrant, there is a large, dense, and vibrant orange-red light trail that curves upwards and to the right. This trail is composed of many fine, overlapping lines, giving it a sense of motion and energy. The overall composition is abstract and visually striking due to the contrast between the dark background and the bright, dynamic light trails.

**Graphika**

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